

Emerging Models of Small Group Ministry

[General Assembly 2007](#) Event 2043, *Reported by Dan Harper; edited by Pat Emery.*

"There is so much exciting stuff going on now in small group ministry," said Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, one of the co-coordinators of the Unitarian Universalist (UU) Small Group Ministry Network. She said she was excited to be able to present a number of emerging models of new ways to do small group ministries in local congregations.

But to start out, Kennedy gave a quick overview of small group ministries. "The purpose of small group ministry is quite simple," she said. "It is summarized in the words 'intimacy' and 'ultimacy.'" More specifically, this means that the purpose of small group ministry is "to connect with others, to be with people who want to talk about what really matters, what is in their hearts." Kennedy also mentioned "friendship and the truth, the depth of being" as lying at the core of small group ministry.

For those in the audience who might not have experienced small group ministry directly, Kennedy explained that there are three essential elements for any small group. Each must offer service to the congregation because, said Kennedy, "these are not private clubs, they're part of the ministry of the whole congregation." Secondly, "All groups should abide by a set of relational ground rules," ground rules which explain how members of each small group will treat each other. "A third thing that is essential," she said, "is that each small group welcomes new members."

Kennedy reviewed other basic elements of small group ministry. Basic information about small group ministry may be found on the [Small Group Ministry Network website](#). But Kennedy noted that the structure of small group ministry is not rigid. "So let's hear from the panelists," she said, to hear about new ways of implementing small groups.

Rev. Helen Zidowecki, former Northeast District Religious Education Consultant, spoke first about using small groups with children and teens. "If we are using small group ministry to create relational congregations," she said, "then we need to backtrack and use small group ministry in religious education from the very beginning."

Zidowecki said that all the basic elements of small group ministry can be used in groups for children and teens. She recommended that the groups contain only 5-8 people (including adults facilitators), as opposed to 6-10 people for adult small groups. "The focus is on ministry, and ministry is sharing and caring," she said. "It's about sharing our stories rather than just sharing information," which makes small groups different from traditional Sunday school classes. "The methodology is dialogue," she continued, "understanding that we are not going to be the same as when we came in."

Zidowecki said that Gail Forsyth-Vail, the Director of Religious Education of the North Parish Unitarian Universalist Church in North Andover, Massachusetts, has published guides for doing small group ministry with children. North Parish has converted their entire Sunday school to the small group ministry model. An order form for these [materials is available on their website](#) (PDF).

"You still can use the relational aspects of small group ministry in your religious education programming," Zidowecki said, even if you use conventional curriculum guides. "You change the focus from information to relational, and then the information means more, and in a different way." Religious education committees and teacher training session can use small group ministry, as well. "The key is that there are designated times for small group ministries, and afterwards there are times for the nuts

and bolts business," Zidowecki said. "Small group ministry just adds a different perspective on how your business is conducted."

Carie Johnsen, representing the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) said that the UUSC was developing small group ministry modules that emphasized social issues. Although UUSC uses the term "covenant group" rather than "small group ministry," the terms refer to the same thing.

"We will be distributing the modules we have created at General Assembly," Johnsen said, and the materials are also available from the UUSC directly. For example, the UUSC has developed a set of seven small group ministry sessions centered on the genocide in Darfur. Because the issue of the genocide in Darfur can be difficult to handle, Johnsen said the small group ministry sessions were designed as a way to "engage with it prayerfully." The sessions, titled ["Drumbeat for Darfur," are available free online](#) (PDF)

UUSC also has six small group ministry session plans available for free online that focus on the themes in [Frances Moore Lappé's book Democracy's Edge](#) (PDF). Johnsen said that Lappé was the one who came up with the idea that the UUSC should develop small group ministry session plans. The session plans have been carefully reviewed and edited.

UUSC plans to publish additional small group ministry session on economic justice and environmental justice. "We wanted to get into the heart of these issues," Johnsen said, instead of staying in the head. She said that the UUSC is looking for reactions to these new resources, so they can improve future publications.

Rev. Ken Beldon, the minister of the 22-month old Wellsprings Congregation in Chester County, Pennsylvania, said that in his congregation, "everything is an experiment." His congregation began with

small group ministry, before they even had regular worship services.

Twenty-two months ago, Wellsprings Congregation began as a single small group. Gradually, they became a church that was small groups. They are currently transitioning towards being a church made up of small groups, i.e., they will be a church that has a central worship service, but one that is still focused on small groups. Wellsprings Congregation uses a "trimester system," where new groups form for fall, winter, and spring sessions. At Wellsprings Congregation, small groups meet every single week for twelve weeks, "then the groups are reshuffled," Beldon said. They also have a shortened summer session.

"We wanted our small groups to be a core growth engine of our congregation," Beldon said. They call their small group "spring boards," playing off the idea of small groups as a growth engine, as well as playing off their congregational name, and playing off the idea that small groups can be a springboard for personal growth and transformation.

Beldon said he got many of his techniques from Nelson Searcy, who leads a large evangelical church in New York City. Beldon has adapted Searcy's techniques to be consistent with UU theology. "What we wanted to do is to give people an opportunity to move beyond the head," Beldon said, "and down into the heart and out into the hands." He added that "life change happens with regular gatherings, and accountability."

Although small groups function as prayer groups and meditation groups at Wellsprings, a key component of their small groups is service in the wider community. "People want to know what you do, not what you say," he said. One of his small groups engaged in "not-so-random acts of kindness" as a way to reach out to the community. Plus, this turned out to be a good way to let the community know the values Wellsprings supports.

"The expectation of flexibility and the expectation of change are woven into what we do," Beldon said. They began with one small group in August, 2005. They now have four small groups, and held their first worship service in January, 2007. They expect to expand to six small groups in the fall.

Kennedy noted two other innovations in small group ministry. Kelly Walker of Valley UU Church in Chandler, Arizona, gets people together in small groups "to experience music together." Walker is a music therapist who chants and sings simple songs in a small group format as a way to promote healing. Rebecca Gammon of West Hills UU Fellowship in Portland, Oregon, has developed small group ministry programs for parents of young children. Child care is offered during these once a month meetings. Gammon sees these small groups as a way for parents to bond with one another.